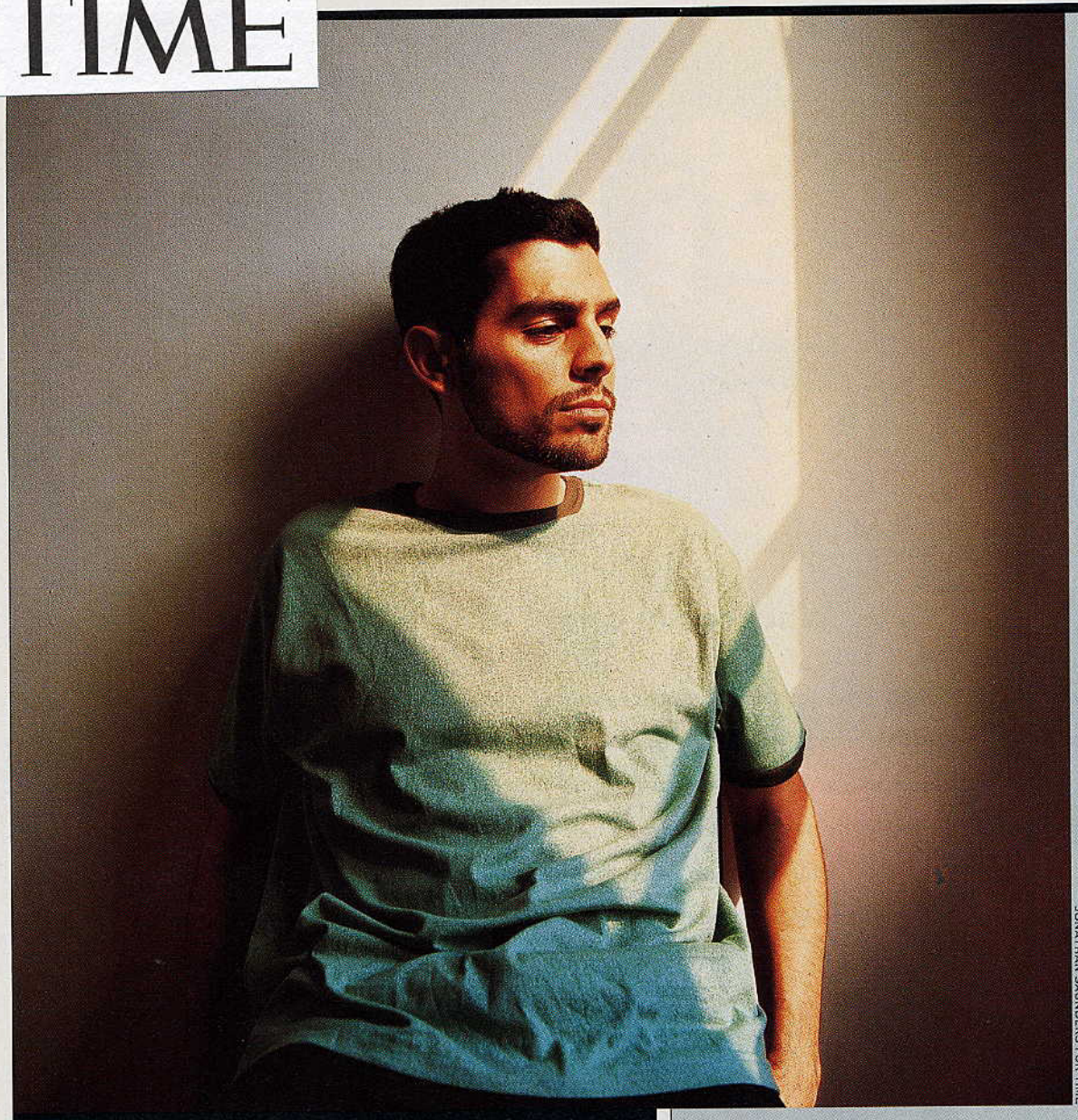
TIME



JONATHAN SAUNDERS FOR TIME

◀ JOHN CARLUCCIO

His turntable transcription system allows DJs to notate the scratches that make up their compositions. An updated version will incorporate scales, octaves and advanced beat-juggling techniques

[TURNTABLIST EXPERT]

Now Every Night He Saves a DJ's Life

In his day job, John Carluccio roams the aisles of Madison Square Garden with a camera crew, scouting the most enthusiastic Knicks fans in the crowd to display on the JumboTron. Away from the Garden, it's Carluccio, 32, who's the enthusiast. For the past 15 years, he has devoted himself to understanding and publicizing the art of scratch DJs, or turntablists, those men and women who make music through frenzied, seemingly chaotic scratches on vinyl. He has directed a documentary series called *Battle Sounds* that appeared in the 1997 Whitney Biennial, showing the sophisticated techniques behind the music; has organized concerts all over the world; and has written serious defenses of the medium as an art form. Yet for all Carluccio's work, DJs still had to deal with the rep that they made music without a system of notation, meaning no composition could ever be reliably re-created. Besides costing them the esteem of other musicians, the lack of a written system also meant turntablists could share their work only through recordings.

At a 1997 studio session of the pioneering DJ collective X-ecutioners, Carluccio found a solution. While the X-ecutioners tried to repeat sounds they had made earlier in the day, Carluccio started scribbling down different lines to represent the various scratches. Then he put his lines on a modified musical staff, with the vertical axis representing the rotation of the record and the horizontal axis representing time. Ever since, he's been refining the system he calls TTM, turntablist transcription methodology. "Before notation, the music didn't have a lingua franca," says Carluccio. "People would refer to certain scratches, like a baby scratch"—which moves the record back and forth without mixer controls—"or a drag"—a slow scratch that creates a low pitch—"but no one knew how to replicate them precisely." With the help of industrial designer Ethan Imboden, Carluccio created *TTM version 1.1,* a pamphlet-size guide (available free at *www.battlesounds.com*) that explains the system in simple terms. Now aspiring DJs can actually see the music, making it easier to learn, and top artists can publish and copyright their compositions. "Putting it on paper doesn't necessarily make the music any better," says Carluccio, "but it helps get more people exposed to it, and that elevates the level of the art."

—By Josh Tyrangiel

▶ DON BYRON

Refusing to be hedged in by convention, he plays the untrendy clarinet, and his repertoire ranges from bebop to klezmer. But, he says, "if somebody wants to be objective about music, they might be able to see what I see."

>>> Music isn't about standing still and becoming safe. <<< MILES DAVIS

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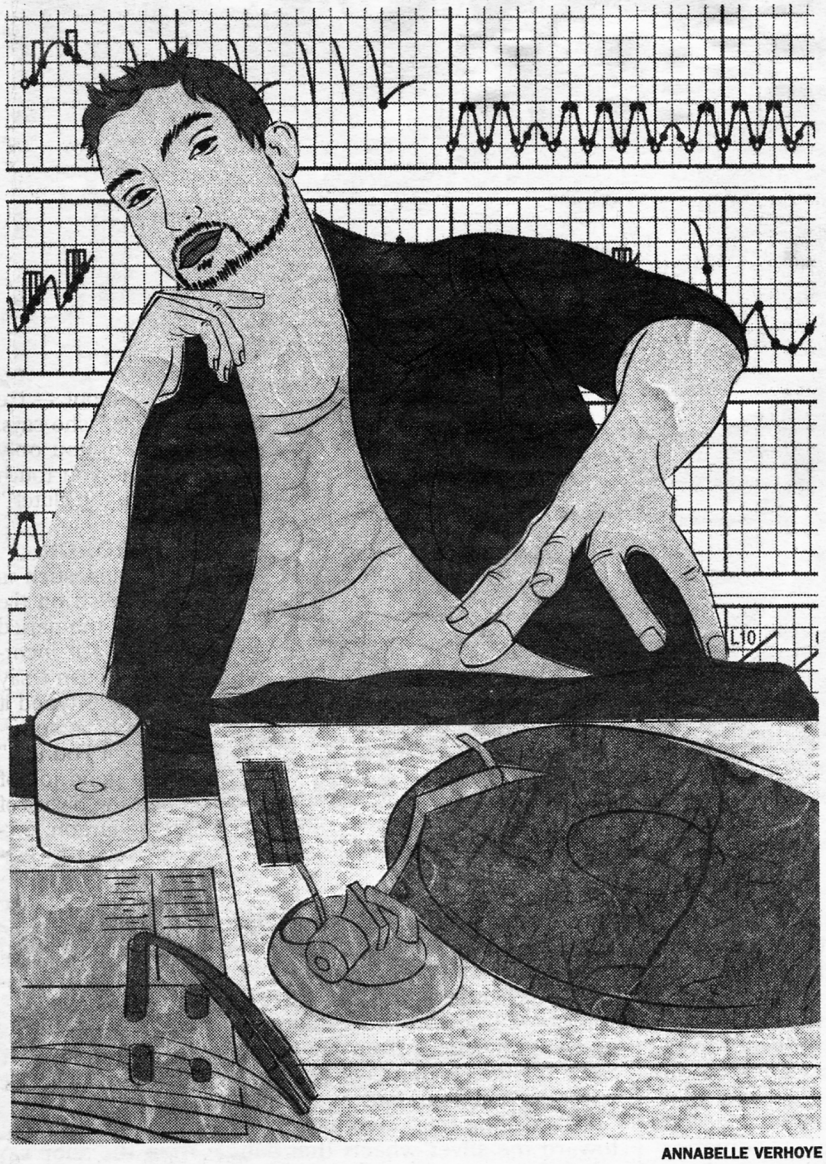
SCRATCH THAT NOTATION



ANNABELLE VERHOYE

John Carluccio may very well be the Mozart of the deejay movement. The director of a documentary called "Battle Sounds," which appeared in the 1997 Whitney Biennial, this mix master wants the world to respect scratch deejays as artists.

Despite the popularity of deejays worldwide, the genre had no musical notation or standard symbolic language, so that many traditional musicians dismissed it as an art form. "The idea of using a turntable as an instrument is abstract to a lot of people and that blocks legitimacy," Carluccio said. "It's like the jazz era. People didn't realize at first that it was a craft with a technique behind it." Even more bothersome, the lack of any notation made it difficult for deejays to re-create a particular composition; they could share their music only through recordings.

So, the same year his documentary played the Biennial, Carluccio began to create a notational format for scratch deejays. With the help of his colleagues Deejay Ray Dawn and Ethan Imboden, Carluccio came up with his **"Turntablist Transcripton Methodology."** The guide for his method can be downloaded from his Web site, **www.BattleSounds.com**. He uses a modified musical staff, with a vertical axis to represent the rotation of the record and a horizontal axis to represent time.

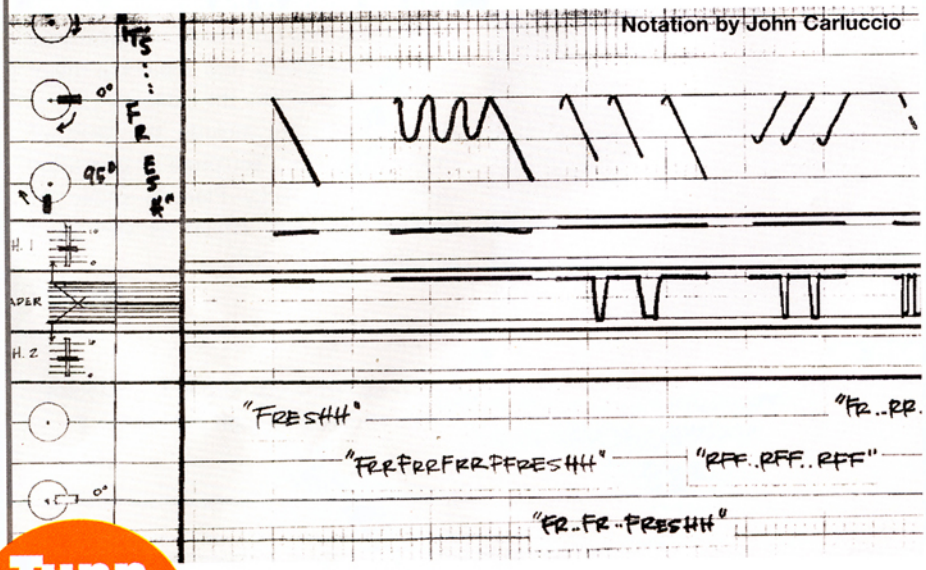
Carluccio describes it as a work in progress: "It is an open source effort. We look forward to your opinions, questions and suggestions. This new audio language is now visible. The possibilities are endless. Compose, create, innovate."

— Michelle Megna

Transforming Notation:

Pioneering the Hieroglyphics of the Scratch

It's funny what two turntables and a mixer can do for our lifestyle. The stereotype of the human jukebox no longer holds true as DJs have evolved into thinkers, innovators and, in the end, producers of their own music. Without our culture, DJing would probably never have become what it is today, with a trillion sounds reaching out in unlimited shades of living color.



Turn Tables
BY DOC RICE

However, the turntable-as-instrument vision isn't solely rooted in Hip-Hop. In 1937, American avant-garde composer John Cage proposed that turntables, along with the vinyl medium, allowed the instrumentalist to "control...sounds and give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach of imagination" ("The Future of Music: Credo," *Silence*). His vision was realized with the innovating progression of the Hip-Hop DJ.

But even after all the years of unending development toward "the next level," there is still no widespread effort to consolidate a plan for basic written notation such as other forms of music have been enjoying. The current state of expressive scratching allows only for improvised methods reminiscent of early jazz musicians. Although this freestyle ability allows the creator to dictate the music according to the moment, a form of standardized notation is needed to exchange ideas and establish communication between different types of musicians, including turntablists.

What makes scratching notation so challenging and unique is the fact that scratching is unlike most other forms of instrumentation. The palette of sounds a turntable musician has access to is virtually unlimited, whereas a pianist or guitarist only has a certain range of sounds to work with. Source material from records can offer anything from simple bass lines to a complex series of sounds stemming from multiple voices in a dialogue. Another aspect that makes scratch notation seemingly (or near) impossible is the fact that similar sounds are not always recorded alike on vinyl. This introduces innumerous variables, such as determining fundamental pitch, sound length and volume level.

However, a small number of individuals across the globe are independently working on this exact issue and currently are developing solutions. Due to the limited space of this column, I'll present only two proposed systems of notation—the first by *Battle Sounds* documentary director John Carluccio and the second by yours truly.

John Carluccio's system was initially stumbled upon while editing *Battle Sounds*. His system uses a method of angular lines (analogous to a sine wave) representing the rotation and distance of travel of the record along the main "staff." The line slopes downward during the forward movement of the record and upward during the reverse movement. Running alongside is a second staff indicating the positions of both the channel and crossfaders of the mixer in time sync with the primary staff. A third staff underneath can be used in the event that the actions of a second turntable need to be recorded. The entire presentation visually reflects the typical setup of one turntable on each side of the mixer.

My system takes a more compatible approach with current notations, allowing for easier interpretation by other musicians as well as utilization of already existing foundations. It uses standard symbols (such as the notes, clefs, etc.) with several modifications to account for certain turntable/mixer-related specifics, such as crossfading and record movement. One of the key premises of this system is the indication of sound pitch relating to melodies and shifts in tones. However, this introduces a problem in determining the fundamental pitch of a given sound. Moreover, it raises the question of how the performer can bend the pitch through record speed accurately enough to reflect a specific note. "Scratches" are broken down into three distinct categories (freehand, strokes and clicks) to which the note symbol types are assigned, along with an indicator to designate forward or reverse movement of the record. For a more thorough description, check out the official explanation online at www.wicked-styles.com/notation.

Other people who have also developed their own notation systems include Q-Bert (1992-1994 DMC World Champion, Invisibl Skratch Piklz), A-Trak (1997 World DMC Champion, Invisibl Skratch Piklz, Allies), Icue1200 and Enema.

The interest in turntable-based music is growing, and so will the need for collaboration between individuals. Sixty-two years after John Cage's bold proclamation to the Seattle Arts Society about the turntable's potential, our scene is finally developing the ability to write down what we see and hear. Improvisation isn't our only path anymore. Welcome to the next level.

john carluccio has found a way to transcribe the ineffable art of scratching. now the whole world's going to spin

drop the needle

by matthew mckinnon photograph by mark heithoff

Turntablism—the art of manipulating records to create new sounds—has always been a bit like skateboarding: Kids who've wanted to learn new tricks have either had to freeze-frame their way through grainy videotapes or find a master willing to impart wisdom. But now, thanks to thirty-year-old Brooklyn filmmaker John Carluccio, there's a third option: transcription. Using line patterns to indicate record and fader movement, Carluccio has invented a system of notation that's similar to sheet music, making it possible to "read" a performer's exploits on the wheels-of-steel. The practice will, in effect, create a record of turntablism's history, and provide a vehicle for its growth. His transcription system is one of four of which he is aware. (It will be documented in Carluccio's forthcoming book, *Turntablists' Transcriptions: a.k.a. Notations for Scratchers.)*

Carluccio's interest in chronicling the genre's evolution also manifests itself in his documentary, *Battle Sounds*. Containing interviews with icons like Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Mixer DXT and Rob Swift, the film is inspired by the improvisational, open-ended spirit of scratching: Carluccio has "remixed" the film for each of its sporadic appearances in hip-hop–friendly clubs across North America. After four years, he still hasn't committed to a final cut.

Future plans include a CD-ROM with a split-screen display. The top half of the screen will show a pair of hands executing different scratches, while the bottom shows the corresponding line patterns. Carluccio has also convinced Ethan Imboden, an industrial designer friend, to develop a polygraph-like device that would plug into a DJ deck and transcribe performances as they happen.

"Once you write scratches down and put them in a different medium," Carluccio says, "you can see more and start to say things like, 'What if I drew it backwards?' All of a sudden it opens doors for new scratches you may never have stumbled upon."

Carluccio's Way

Caveat: Scratching is an emotional art form. You can't expect a superstar's playbook to make you his equal. It's one thing to learn the skills; it's another to have heart.

Rubs
This column illustrates how different record manipulations produce the sounds at the bottom of the page. For example, to execute a rub ("FrrFrrFrrFreshhh"), the record is spun back a few times and then released

Transformer
Like a rub, except it uses rapid-fire fader movement to cut the sound in and out

Drag
Otherwise known as a reverse cut. The fader stays on Channel 1 while the record pulls back and switches off as the record is released

Cutting
To cut, pull the record back while dropping the fader, then release and switch back to Channel 1. Cuts (and drags) can be sloppy—but that's a good thing. The short hooks in this column show the tiny imperfections that give turntablism its flavour

Marking records
DJs use adhesive tape to remind themselves where the sound they're looking for appears on the record ("It's fresh" in this case). Here, "fresh" begins at 0° and ends at 95°—the scratches shown all occur between these two positions

The fader
Basically an on/off switch. This tells DJs when they should be "on" Channel 1—the turntable that produces the "Fresh" sound—and when to cut away to Channel 2